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## Pre-Service Teachers' Responses to Ethical Situations Related to Teaching Practice

Nantarat Kruea-In<sup>a,\*</sup>, Chatchai Kruea-In<sup>b</sup>

<sup>a</sup>*Kasetsart University, Kamphaeng Saen Campus, Nakhon Pathom 73140, Thailand*

<sup>b</sup>*Chiang Mai Rajabhat University, Chiang Mai 50300, Thailand*

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### Abstract

Enhancing ethics concerning teaching practice is one of the most important issues in teacher education. All teachers need to improve their ethical sense for maintaining professional standards in teaching and doing research as well as monitoring and guiding students' ethical behaviours. It is crucial for pre-service teachers to develop their ethical sense during learning in teacher institutions. The purpose of this study is to investigate pre-service teachers' responses to ethical situations. The responses were collected from seventy-four third-year pre-service physical and health education teachers who enrolled in the Ethics and Codes for Teachers Course in 2014. Six ethical situations with open-ended questions relating to student plagiarisms, teacher-teacher conflicts, and parent-teacher conflicts were used to gather the pre-service teachers' views. The pre-service teachers were grouped into five to seven, discussed with the group members to come up with the best answers for the six ethical situations. A constant comparative method was employed to analyze the data. The results revealed multiple compromising solutions for the ethical situations. Details of responses are presented and discussed.

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### 1. Introduction

Making moral judgments is unavoidable for all humans involving 'interconnected conceptions of goodness, rightness, the class of beings worthy of moral consideration, and virtue' (Keller, 2010, p.1). Ethics plays an important role in moral judgments, making quality decision making not only for one's self but also for others to

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\* Nantarat Kruea-In Tel.: +6-687-256-1518; fax: +6-634-355-605.

E-mail address: [fedunrp@ku.ac.th](mailto:fedunrp@ku.ac.th)

create the quality of living in our social world. Teachers need to be the experts in ethics as they always face the ethical cases related to students, parents, colleagues and school administrators. Teachers are responsible for maintaining regular work hours, planning and teaching with knowledge and special care of students, self-reflecting for their own improvement on teaching practice, enhancing the cooperation with colleagues and parents and dispelling disagreements (Wynne, 1995 cited in Bergman, 2013). Besides, students do not only learn content subjects and skills from their teachers but also values, such as justice, fairness and discrimination. Teachers are significant exemplars of ethical behaviors for students to lead them separate between right and wrong (Bergman, 2013). The teachers who do not realize and know how to react with ethical situations will fail to teach ethics and not be able to be exemplars for their students (Gokce, 2013). Teacher ethical practice is also required by Thai government. The Teachers Council of Thailand stipulated a revised Regulation on Ethics of Teaching Professions in 2013. The regulation enforces all teachers to ethically behave to maintain the respect for teachers themselves, to teaching profession, and to students and stakeholders. Learning outcomes of Thai learners also assemble an ethical aspect as stipulated in Thailand Basic Education Core Curriculum (BECC) B.E. 2551 (A.D. 2008). The BECC prescribes the required achievement all of the eight learning for basic education learners to acquire knowledge, skills and the desirable characteristics, including honesty, integrity, self-discipline, dedication and commitment to work and public mindedness. Thus, teacher education institutes have a main responsibility to in preparing and training of ethics for pre-service teachers to effectively work as ethical teachers, teach ethics to students and be able to cope with ethical situations in their future. The purpose of this study is to investigate pre-service teachers' responses to ethical situations after they enrolled in an undergraduate ethics course for teachers.

## **2. Participants and Context of the Study**

Seventy-four (52 male and 22 female) third-year pre-service physical and health education teachers in a 5 year teacher education program were participants of this study. According to their study plan, in year 1-4, they study in educational subjects (e.g. Introduction to Education, Educational Psychology, Curriculum, Learning Management Strategies, Assessment and Research for Learning Development), along with physical education subjects including Principle and Methods in Teaching of Sports (e.g. golf, tennis, swimming, hockey, etc.) and health science subjects (e.g. human anatomy and physiology, Health and Nutrition, Sex Education and Family Health). Teaching practicum spans in the entire of year 5. One of the authors of this article was the main instructor responsible for the Ethics and Codes for Teachers Course, a two-credit compulsory educational subject for every pre-service teacher. This course is enrolled in the third year of the teacher education program. According to the syllabus, pre-service teachers learn about ethics and moral for teachers, teacher work and responsibility, characteristics and personality of good teachers, laws and regulations related to teaching profession, teacher competency development and career progression in teaching. The participants had several discussions about improper teacher behaviors from news and made-up stories.

## **3. Instrument, Data Collection and Analysis**

The instrument of this study was six ethical situations with open-ended questions related to student plagiarisms, teacher-teacher conflicts and parent-teacher conflicts were developed by the authors based on a Thai context. The whole description of the ethical situations and open-ended questions are shown in Appendix A. At the last class period of the second semester of the 2014 academic year (November 2013-February 2014), the instrument was given to group of 5-7 of the participants (totally 12 groups). Each group had 60 minutes for discussion with group members to come up with the best answers for the situations and questions. The responses were collected at the end of the class period and categorized by a constant comparative method of qualitative data analysis.

## **4. Results and Discussion**

Each group of the participants selected one best answer for each situation. The responses are presented and discussed in this section.

#### 4.1. Student plagiarisms

Plagiarism is a significant issue in education. Two ethical situations were given to challenge the pre-service physical and health teachers' sense of loyalty in doing homework/assignment and taking tests. The first situation was that they found students copying homework or cheating on tests. They were asked if they would do something to react to this situation. All groups answered that they would stop the copying and cheating behaviors because students would be directly disadvantaged in learning as they had insufficiency of practice their own thinking and skills and they might become more disloyalty in the future. The pre-service physical and health teachers also suggested the means to stop these behaviors, which were explaining about the disadvantage of plagiarisms with informing parent (50.00%); adjusting homework/test strategies (e.g. providing multiple sets of homework, parallel testing and seat arrangement) (41.67%); mark deduction (33.33%); and asking students to redo the work (25.00%).

The other situation investigated what pre-service physical and health teachers would do if they found out that a student handed in two identical artifacts, one to them and the other to a teacher of a different subject. The most frequently answer (50.00%) was a set of admonition, telling the student to hand in a different piece of work and informing parents. Two groups (16.67%) indicated that they would discuss with the other teacher for the possibility of conformance. They would carefully consider changing the format of the assigned work or integration of the subjects. Obviously, these two groups of pre-service teachers pointed out professional development across the subjects. Five groups (41.67%) provided an alternative solution that they would grade the work according to their criteria. They did not mind if the work could be handed in other subjects as long as it met teachers' objectives.

Results from student plagiarism situations showed that the participants could not accept disloyalty. They tended to care about students' feeling and try to encourage students in learning. They somewhat knew how to handle with cheating students and were willing to give an opportunity for their students to redo the homework or assignments with plausible reasons.

#### 4.2. Teacher-teacher conflicts

Teachers may have different way to teach students. A conflict of teacher strategy was used to find out whether the pre-service physical and health teachers had fair management concerning teaching practice. In the third situation, they were asked what they would do, on behalf of the principal, if two teachers, teaching at the same grades and classes, had different strategy appropriated with the subject. As given in this situation, a Thai Language teacher needed students to be 'neat and clean' on every work with full piece of paper. In the other hand, a science teacher, with a slogan 'clear and save', always helped students to make short and clear science statements and informed students to use little pieces of paper to save the world. This sounds wonderful about teacher intention to achieve the outcome of each subject. Unfortunately, these two teachers discussed with students and discredited each other's strategy. To response to this situation, the majority (50.00%) of the pre-service physical and health teachers would call for a meeting between the two teachers and themselves to consider the benefits of each strategy then propose a new strategy (e.g. 'neat and save') to reduce the teacher conflict and effect to students. Four group (33.33%) would make the two teachers consider about students feelings, separate them to teach at different grades, and request them not to talk about each other and be a good models for students. The two other groups (16.67%) would do nothing and ask students to follow each of the teacher's strategy.

The other situation in this topic was related to time of teaching. The pre-service physical and health teachers were asked what they would do if a group of students told a guidance teacher to cancel his classes and transfer the time for the physical and health education subjects because the students were fond of you and your subjects. Seven groups (58.33%) simply responded that they would not teach and explain to the students that every subject was important and had specific goals for students to achieve. However, these groups were willing to teach during students' free time, lunch time, after school, or weekends if students requested. Two groups (16.67%) also responded that they would not teach in the guidance subject class periods but they would adjust their own lesson plans to meet students' interests. Three groups (25.00%) answered that they would teach only after they got permission from the guidance teacher.

Results from teacher-teacher conflict situations showed that the participants respected to the rights of others. They would try to solve conflicts with compromising solution, looking for benefits from the discordance, and finding other appropriate solutions other than the given choices.

#### *4.3. Parent-teacher conflicts*

Financial status plays a significant role in Thai low-income families. Some parents need their teenage children's help to earn more money after school and at night. Some work can be a gold mine but it is insecure, such as coyote dancers. Certainly, these students would not be able to focus on their school work due to insufficient sleep. The pre-service physical and health teachers were asked to react with this situation. All groups would negotiate with the parents to abate students' work. Eight groups (66.67%) would seek for scholarship for the students. Four groups (33.33%) would find part-time jobs (e.g. school general assistants, salesmen, and handicraft makers) for them. The responses to this situation showed that the participants considered financial support for students as part of their career. They also intended to change parents' improper ideas and protected the rights for education of their students.

The last ethical situation given to the participants was related to unjust grading. They were also asked to handle with a wicked influential parent who requested overrated grades for his child. Five groups (41.67%) would not act upon the request but explain about harmful results of the unjust grading. Four groups (33.33%) would negotiate with the parent to increasing grades after the students handed in supplement work. However, three groups (25.00%) would comply with the request due to fear of potential danger to themselves and their families. Teachers must clarify how to assign grades to students, parents, and stakeholders in advance and never give a grade to a favorite or special student (Martinson, 2009). The participants' responses to this situation showed that all of them were aware of a fair and explicit grade assignment. However, nearly two fifth would maintain the fairness of the grading system. While more than half of them chose to change the grades for their own survival in lives.

### **5. Conclusion and Implication for Teacher Education**

This study reveals pre-service physical and health education teachers' orientation to six possible ethical situations which any teacher might face in the daily teaching practice. The results showed that not all but the majority of them expressed sound appropriate moral and ethical decision making responding to the given situations. They provided compromising answers or solutions for each ethical situation. This study cannot assure the participants' certain reaction of the situations. The results actually reflect on our undergraduate ethics course and suggest administering the more meticulous strategies in nurturing virtue for pre-service teachers. Only one ethics course may not enough. Ethics should not just be embedded entire teacher preparation curriculum but must be explicitly blended to the courses' content (Bergman, 2013). Panicker (2012) pointed out discipline-specific research ethic courses for undergraduate and graduate students in social and behavioral sciences to improve ethics in doing research. This idea might transfer for the improvement of ethics course to move beyond the general ethics for teachers to discipline-specific ethics courses, such as Ethics for Physical and Health Education Teachers, so that pre-service teachers can be exposed to more relevant ethical issues in teaching practice of specific subjects and better-prepared for their future.

### **6. Acknowledgements**

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### **Appendix A. The Ethical Situations and open-ended questions**

The six ethical situations relating to teaching practice and open-ended questions given to the pre-service teachers are shown as the followings.

#### *A.1. Students plagiarisms*

- Situation 1: The majority of students in your class copying homework and cheating on tests. Will you do something about this? If yes, what will you do?
- Situation 2: You find out that a student handed in two identical artifacts, one to you and the other to a teacher of a different subject. What will you do?

#### A.2. Teacher-teacher conflicts

- Situation 3: A Thai Language teacher and a science teacher teach same grades and same classes. These teachers have different strategies in teaching in their subjects. The Thai Language teacher needs her students to be 'neat and clean' on every work. She required all students to use full piece of paper with written date of assignment. In the other hand, the science teacher, comes with a slogan 'clear and save'. He always helps students to make short and clear science statements and inform students to use little pieces of paper to save the world. Unfortunately, these two teachers discuss with students and discredit each other's strategy. On behalf of the principal, what will you do?
- Situation 4: There are a lot of extra activities held throughout this semester. You cannot be able to cover the lessons as planned. Some students, very fond of you and your subject, ask for extra classes. You tell them to find a free time for instruction. The students tell a guidance teacher to cancel his classes and transfer the time for the physical and health education subjects. The guidance teacher comes to you and asks about what you think about this situation. What will you react to him?

#### A.3. Parent-teacher conflicts

- Situation 5: Many students come from low-income families. Their parents require them to help earning more money after school and at night. Some work can be a gold mine but it is insecure, such as coyote dancers. Certainly, these students would not be able to focus on their school work due to insufficient sleep. What do you think about this? And will you do anything to react to this situation?
- Situation 6: You heard that a wicked influential parent sent your colleague a request for overrated grades for his child. Everyone knows that this influential parent gives a big reward for people who comply but can be harmful to dissatisfying people. So, your colleague decided to give unjust grades to his child. If you were your colleague, what would you do?

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